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ABSTRACT

Many reasons can be offered for teaching about Australia. The field of Australian studies offers many opportunities for U.S. teachers and students to critically analyze aspects of their own culture, for there are many experiences in the history of Australia that parallel the U.S. experience. Australia and the United States have strong ongoing economic, social, and political ties. A study of Australia reveals interesting interactions between an extremely old geological landscape and the evolution of its unique fauna and flora. The Aboriginal people in Australia have possibly the oldest indigenous culture still operating. Teaching about Australia can profitably be included in the curriculum from kindergarten to 12th grade as part of a global perspective in social studies education. Teachers can begin with basic geography lessons to locate Australia on a world map, noting its size, major geographic features, climatic zones, demographic distribution, location of major cities, and state borders. A historical perspective can be used to enhance understanding of different cultures in Australia. The use of a range of Australian literature, art, films, and visual and oral primary source materials can be a useful entry into an understanding of the values and assumptions underlying Australian culture. A study of issues facing Australia today can enhance students' inquiry skills and enable them to form generalizations that may be useful in explaining issues facing the United States. A 16-item bibliography is included. (JB)

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Teaching about Australia

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It is only in very recent times that Australia has penetrated the consciousness of many American classroom teachers as a potentially worthwhile area of study for their students. Most teachers have little or no formal education about Australia. Recent Australian–American sporting events, films, and tourist advertising have been widely publicized in the United States. But mostly these have presented stereotypical images of Australia. The few school textbooks that mention Australia tend to reinforce these stereotypes. The explanation of this lack of interest perhaps reflects as much on Australians themselves, who tend to be so obsessed with inventing national images that outside observers just don't know where to begin a study about Australia. So why should American teachers include Australia in their school program? How can Australian studies be effectively incorporated into existing social studies programs? This ERIC Digest examines (1) the importance of teaching about Australia, (2) the potential areas of the curriculum in which Australia could be included, and (3) useful strategies for teaching about Australia.

Why is it Important to Teach about Australia? Australian studies offers many opportunities for American teachers and students to analyze critically aspects of their own culture. There are many experiences in the history of Australia that parallel the American experience. These can include, for example, the conquering of frontiers, the nature of the relationship between indigenous peoples (Aborigines and Amerindians) and the "new" settlers, the search for an appropriate federal system of government, the relationship between labor and capital, and issues relating to being a multicultural society.

Australia and the United States have strong ongoing economic, social, and political ties. The extent of trade between the two countries continues to grow while there are at the same time areas of intense trade competition. The impact of the U.S. on aspects of Australian culture via agencies such as fast food chains, film distributors, and clothing manufacturers is extensive. Australia has strong political ties with the U.S. through such treaties as ANZUS and the Antarctic Treaty. These are all areas worthy of investigation in social studies classrooms.

A study of Australia reveals interesting interactions between an extremely old geological landscape and the evolution of its unique fauna and flora. The use and abuse of Australia's unique landscape by Aborigines and more recent white settlers forms the context for discussions about protection of the environment. Human interactions with the environment in Australia can be compared with those in North America.

The Aboriginal people in Australia have possibly the oldest indigenous culture still operating, a unique way of life dating back more than 40,000 years. Australian studies should include insights about these resourceful people. The documentation of these Aboriginal societies, made more difficult since Aborigines have no written code of language, has revealed in recent years the great age, complexity, and diversity of Aboriginal societies. A study of Aboriginal art, both old and recent, is a study of the whole cultural approach. Aboriginal art is unlike any other and is now in great demand throughout the art world.

Where Does Australian Studies Belong in the Curriculum? Teaching about Australia can profitably be included in the curriculum from kindergarten to twelfth grade as part of a global perspective in social studies education. For example, young children can gain great enjoyment from an investigation of Australian animals. They can also be enlightened by a study of traditional Aboriginal legends.

At the upper-elementary levels, children can investigate Australia's unique flora and fauna; assess the potential of Australia as a place for a holiday; and collect Australian stamps and coins, perhaps as part of a regional study.

At the high school level, history and social science courses offer many opportunities for the study of Australia. For example, in U.S. history courses teachers may make comparisons with the Australian colonial experiences, the gold rushes, measures aimed at restricting immigration, defense alliances, and the framing of both Constitutions. Comparisons can enhance comprehension of common human needs and experiences, and can also help students to understand the conceptual bases of these experiences in their own local context. In world history courses worthwhile comparative examples can include the investigations of trans-Pacific culture flows in film, literature, and popular music, or discussions of issues of assimilation or integration in multicultural societies, or examination of comparative issues in federal-state relations. An inquiry focus on these issues can heighten students' awareness of the universal nature and significance of these concepts.

Teachers need not be restricted to the very limited space allocated to Australia in American social studies textbooks. There is, however, a real need for more detailed resources appropriate for all grade levels. Teachers and students should contact Australian embassies and consulates in the U.S. or write to exchange information with subject associations, teachers, and students in Australia. There are some excellent curriculum resources available in Australia.

What Strategies Might be Used in Classrooms to Teach about Australia? Australia may be as large geographically as the United States, but its relatively minor political and economic role in the world often results in students having only minimal understandings

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about Australia and Australians. At its worst, this is manifested in gross generalizations and in stereotyping. The media perpetuate these simplified views of Australia. So what can teachers do in social studies classes to teach about Australia? Given the present lack of accurate understandings, what teaching strategies might be the most effective?

Begin with basic geography lessons to locate Australia on a world map, noting its size, major geographic features, climatic zones, demographic distribution, location of major cities, and state borders. Teachers might then prepare a classroom activity in which students plan a holiday to Australia, including itinerary, costs, travel documentation, things to take, and things to buy. Travel agents and airline companies are good resources for this activity. Students need an accurate database of information about Australia and basic location skills before they can engage in any comparison, analysis, and evaluation with their own country.

Use a historical perspective to enhance understanding of different cultures in Australia. Recent archaeological findings confirming the existence of Aborigines in Australia more than 40,000 years ago need to be related to the history of European settlement in Australia during the past 200 years. The growing appreciation of the diversity, complexity, and richness of traditional Aboriginal culture is worthy of a study in its own right. The impact of white settlement on Aboriginal culture can form the basis for useful comparisons with the impact of white settlement in North America on Amerindian cultures.

A historical perspective provides a backdrop for present-day analysis of issues arising out of the nature of the early contacts, including land rights and policy changes in the area of social justice. A broad historical study of white settlement in Australia is necessary for an understanding of major institutions such as the Federal and State Parliamentary system, and of patterns of culture such as the search for an Australian identity. By examining such concepts as national identity, be it Australian or American, students can develop an emphatic appreciation of cultural differences and similarities. An essential approach in social studies classrooms is to take a global perspective in the search for understandings of universal concepts.

The use of a range of Australian literature, art, films, and visual and oral primary source materials can be a useful entry into an understanding of the values and assumptions underlying Australian culture. What does a recent popular film like CROCODILE DUNDEE tell us about Australia and Australians? How do the values, both implicit and explicit, in this film compare with the writings of the Australian author Patrick White or the black poet Kathryn Pritchard? To what extent and in what ways does American culture impinge on Australian culture? The opportunity for students to clarify their own values and the values and assumptions underlying the actions of their nation is a central objective in the teaching of social studies. A comparative teaching strategy, particularly with a country like Australia which shares values and common cultural beginnings, can help American students to note the similarities and differences and to be more precise in defining and articulating their own values.

A study of issues facing Australia today can enhance students' inquiry skills, and enable them to form generalizations that might be useful in explaining issues facing Americans. Case studies of immigrants in a multicultural society in Australia could be used to develop skills in different forms of data gathering. The issue of participating in the America's Cup sailing competition could be used to develop skills in detecting bias in media reporting. The issue of joint Australian/American hi-tech satellite tracking technology could be an appropriate content area for senior students to develop skills in role playing and debating.

Most of these teaching strategies do not depend upon the availability of a vast library about Australia. They do, however, require teachers and students to talk regularly to Australian visitors to America, to collect articles, to record documentaries, and to utilize the numerous resources that are already available in the community. The strategies are pragmatic and are consistent with the objectives of teaching social studies at all grade levels. The particular focus is on accurate understandings, on the development of social studies skills, and on an appreciation of cultures different from our own.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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